



The 5776 (2015-2016) cycle of Dvar Tzedek is a special one. To commemorate AJWS's 30th anniversary, we are sharing a selection of some of our favorite commentaries from past years. Each legacy commentary will be introduced with a related reflection on AJWS's work and contemporary issues.

Introductory Reflection

In his 2011 Dvar Tzedek on *Parashat Kedoshim*, author Jimmy Taber writes on the importance of pursuing both justice and peace, as outlined in this week's *parashah*. As social justice activists, some of us feel the most lasting impact comes from pursuing "justice"—effecting change on a structural level, like changing laws or policies or advancing human rights. Others feel that pursuing "peace"—improving interpersonal relationships—is the most important path to change. Jimmy sheds light on this dichotomy by quoting Samson Raphael Hirsch, a 19th century rabbi, who said: "While the legal system requires objectivity to fairly protect the rights of all, making peace with our fellow human beings requires sensitivity to the particulars of each individual's needs and circumstances." In other words, "when put together—according to Hirsch—justice and peace are greater than the sum of their parts."

One issue where this combination is particularly important is with the movement to advance the rights of LGBT people. In communities around the world, LGBT people face discrimination and violence that are both codified by law and reinforced by personal prejudice. To counter these dual challenges, AJWS grantees seek to change both laws and hearts.

For example, in Uganda, where violence against LGBT people is rampant, AJWS grantee Human Rights Awareness and Promotion Forum (HRAPF), runs a legal aid clinic to fight these hate crimes. HRAPF has handled more than 500 cases, ranging from arrests by police to beatings by the public and banishment of LGBT people from their communities. In 2013, when Uganda's parliament passed an egregious "Anti-Homosexuality Law," HRAPF staff and other activists challenged the law's constitutionality in court—and won. At the same time, other Ugandan organizations, such as Transgender Equality Uganda, are using counselling, education and outreach to families to spread messages of understanding, tolerance, and building relationships between LGBT people and their families and communities in the hope of creating lasting respect.

As Jimmy tells us, systemic change will only arise through the pursuit of both justice and peace. "Without pursuing both, we can never achieve the world we envision." Read about HRAPF's work to overturn the anti-homosexuality bill [here](#), and read Jimmy's piece below.

Parashat Kedoshim 5776

By Jimmy Taber

May 14, 2016

(Reprinted from April 30, 2011)

Everyone is crying out for peace
None is crying out for justice

I don't want no peace
I need equal rights and justice.¹
-Peter Tosh

Peter Tosh's revolutionary lyrics in his 1977 song "Equal Rights" challenge some of the core assumptions of social justice activism. Critical of the tendency of his era's dominant activist culture to subsume demands for justice within an overarching movement for peace, Tosh boldly asserts that justice represents a more pressing need, and even goes so far as to dismiss the desire for peace entirely. By presenting peace and justice in opposition to one another, Tosh rejects the common understanding that these two concepts encompass complementary and linked goals. For Tosh, the achievement of peace between people—whether in war zones like Vietnam or in racially and politically charged neighborhoods in the United States—will not stop the underlying inequality and injustice perpetuated by legal, social and cultural systems on a structural level.

Parashat Kedoshim provides a prescription for how to achieve the kind of justice Tosh is advocating for. Leviticus 19:15 reads: "You shall not render an unfair decision: do not favor the poor or show deference to the rich; judge your kinsman fairly."² Samson Raphael Hirsch, a 19th-century German rabbi influential in the development of modern Orthodox Judaism, understands this commandment to refer to the community's responsibility to maintain an objective system of justice for all of its members. In his commentary on the verse, Hirsch writes: "All those to be judged stand opposite each other...every one of them without exception has equal claim to equal justice."³

The Torah immediately follows this verse with the command: "Do not deal basely with your countrymen; do not stand idly by the blood of your fellow, I am the Lord."⁴ Hirsch reads this in direct contrast to the previous command to maintain an impartial framework for fair judgment. Building off his interpretation of verse 15 as relating exclusively to the legal system, Hirsch understands verse 16 as pertaining strictly to interpersonal relationships. He writes:

Exactly the same justice which in court banishes personality entirely from the judgment, and judges the action entirely in absolute objectivity, that same justice demands in social life the most meticulous and anxious conscientiousness in considering every possible condition which could make the person and his character appear in a better light."⁵

In other words, individuals are required to go to great lengths to display the compassion for one another that, by its nature, is absent from the legal system.

By interpreting these two verses in relation to each other, Hirsch asserts that the message of Leviticus—more complicated than both that of Tosh and the peace activists that he criticized—is that neither an equitable legal system nor individual compassion alone is sufficient in creating a just society. While the legal system requires

¹ Tosh, Peter. "Equal Rights," *Equal Rights*, 1977.

² Leviticus 19:15.

³ Hirsch, Samson Raphael. *The Hirsch Chumash: The Five Books of Torah*. New York: Feldheim Judaica Press, 2000. p. 519.

⁴ Leviticus 19:16.

⁵ Hirsch, 519.

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objectivity to fairly protect the rights of all, making peace with our fellow human beings requires sensitivity to the particulars of each individual's needs and circumstances. When put together—according to Hirsch—justice and peace are greater than the sum of their parts.

As activists, I believe that it is essential to recognize the importance of both the interpersonal and structural components of our work. Many of us prefer to perform acts of compassion rather than advocate for more just societal frameworks, because helping others face-to-face can feel more personally fulfilling. But as we engage in this type of social action—helping the homeless, volunteering internationally or raising funds to aid those living in poverty—we must not forget that we have the responsibility to pursue justice on an institutional level as well—to support people and organizations that work to create and maintain just legal structures that ensure basic rights for all people. Otherwise, the pursuit of this type of justice can fall by the wayside, delaying the achievement of systemic change.

Parashat Kedoshim teaches us that there must ultimately be a symbiotic relationship between peace and justice. Even Tosh, who so audaciously proclaimed the irrelevancy of peace, later came to recognize its merits. In a 1984 interview, three years before being murdered in his home, Tosh said: "I a look fe peace. [sic] Because, to me, peace should have really meant people respecting people, people loving people. A man becoming his brother's keeper."⁶ Perhaps it is this combination of respect and love—for individuals, for systems and for the inherent equality between people—that unites peace and justice. Without pursuing both, we can never achieve the world we envision.



Jimmy Taber is the New Israel Fund's associate director in New York. Previously, he worked in Israel for the Joint Distribution Committee's Center for International Migration and Integration, managing Israel's Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration Program for asylum seekers and migrant workers. Prior to his work at the JDC, Jimmy received his MA and MBA from Brandeis University's Hornstein Program in Jewish Professional Leadership. Jimmy can be reached at jamesetaber@gmail.com.

⁶ Peter Tosh quoted in *Pulse Magazine*, June 1984. Cited in Reid, Sheldon. "Peter Tosh Chants Down Peace." *The Gleaner*, 6 March 2011. <http://jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20110306/focus/focus4.html>

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